



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Guatemala

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom; however, traditional Mayan leaders continued to report discrimination from some nongovernmental sources.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 42,043 square miles and a population of approximately 12.7 million. Official census data indicated that the country's indigenous population was 43 percent, although unofficial estimates were higher.

Historically, the country has been overwhelmingly Roman Catholic. However, in recent decades Protestant groups have gained a significant number of members. Although there was no accurate census of religious affiliation, some sources estimated that between 50 and 60 percent of the population was Catholic and approximately 40 percent was Protestant, primarily evangelical. Leaders of Mayan spiritual organizations maintained that many indigenous Catholics and some Protestants also practiced some form of indigenous spiritual ritual. The largest Protestant denomination was the Full Gospel Church, followed by the Assembly of God, the Central American Church, and the Prince of Peace Church. Other Protestant denominations included Baptist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, and Episcopalian, as well as many independent evangelical denominations. Other religious groups were represented, including the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, and, primarily in the capital, small communities of Jews and Muslims. Few citizens considered themselves atheists. There were no accurate statistics on church attendance, although various sources reported that it was very high in the evangelical community and somewhat lower among Catholics.

Catholic and Protestant churches were distributed throughout the country, and their adherents were distributed among all major ethnic groups and political parties.

U.S. and Latin American Christian missionaries worked in both religious and social capacities, although there were no reliable statistics as to their numbers.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. The Government at all levels sought to protect this right in full and did not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

There is no state religion; however, the constitution recognizes explicitly the distinct legal personality of the Catholic Church.

The Government does not establish requirements for religious recognition, nor does it impose registration requirements for religious members to worship together. The Government requires religious congregations as well as nonreligious associations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to register as legal entities if they wish to transact business. Such legal recognition is necessary, among other things, for a congregation to rent or purchase premises, enter into contracts, and enjoy tax-exempt status. The Government does not charge religious groups a registration fee.

The Catholic Church does not have to register as a legal entity; it is so recognized in the constitution. Any other congregation may file a copy of its bylaws and a list of its initial membership with the Ministry of Government to receive formal recognition. The congregation must have at least twenty-five initial members, and the bylaws must reflect an intention to pursue religious or

spiritual objectives. Applications are rejected only if the organization does not appear to be devoted to a religious objective, appears to be in pursuit of illegal activities, or engages in activities that appear likely to threaten the public order. There were no reports that the Government rejected any group's application during the period covered by this report; however, Protestant leaders reported that their churches have found the process lengthy (lasting from six months to several years), and they estimated that, due to these difficulties, 8,000 Protestant churches in the country either had not applied for registration or had not completed the process.

Foreign missionaries are required to obtain tourist visas, which are issued for renewable periods of three months. After renewing their tourist visa once, they may apply for temporary residence. Specific missionary visas are not issued or required.

The Government does not subsidize religious groups, and no groups reported receiving national funding. The constitution permits, but does not require, religious instruction in public schools. There is no national framework for determining the nature or content of religious instruction in public schools. Accordingly, when provided, such instruction tends to be programmed at the local level. During the period covered by this report, the Ministry of Education consulted with the Catholic Church and Protestant groups on the integration of general values, although not specific religious teachings, into school curricula.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

Although registered religious entities are legally exempt from taxes, Protestant leaders noted that local officials sometimes required their churches to pay property taxes.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom. Leaders of the Catholic, evangelical Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim communities reported that complaints from their followers of discrimination based on religion were rare.

The ecumenical movement was focused on discussion of social questions rather than interfaith discourse. For several years, representatives of Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and traditional Mayan spirituality have participated in the Interreligious Dialogue and the Foro Guatemala (the former meets every two to three months, the latter irregularly) to communicate primarily on social and political topics.

Evangelical Protestant churches were split between a majority group, which avoided ecumenical engagement with other religious traditions, including Roman Catholicism and Mayan religious practices, and a minority group, which actively promoted an ecumenical and multicultural viewpoint.

Indigenous people historically have been dominated by ladinos (citizens of mixed European and indigenous descent) and generally have not participated fully in the mainstream of social, economic, and political activity.

Mayan religious leaders continued to note widespread disagreements with evangelical Protestants, and to a lesser extent, charismatic Catholics. Protestant churches historically have been less tolerant of indigenous practices than the Catholic Church, whose approach in many areas of the country is to tolerate traditional practice not directly in conflict with Catholic dogma. During the Spanish colonial period, some Catholic churches were built on sacred Mayan sites. Mayan leaders reported that in a few areas of the country Catholic priests have forbidden followers of Mayan spirituality access to these sites.

Although many members of evangelical congregations are indigenous, some local evangelical leaders have denounced traditional religious practices as "witchcraft" or "devil worship" and have discouraged their indigenous members from being involved with traditional religious practices.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. embassy officials, including the ambassador, met on many occasions with leaders of major religious institutions as well as religious-based NGOs. The embassy promoted dialogue between leaders of Mayan and ladino groups within civil society and within diverse religious communities.

[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](#)